




Tall Cans

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Tall Cans

by [ChelseaFrown \(orphan_account\)](#).

Summary

Tommy misses his family. He wonders when they stopped missing him.

This is the Sad ending from Nights Like These. It is not canon and it will not make sense without reading it first.

Title from Pigeon Pit's Tall cans. Lyrics that fit this well:

I will never be able to get close to anyone as long as I am unable to admit that they are hurting me

And I miss you more than I miss home

And I would love to tell you all the pointless shit I did today but we haven't talked in months and we're a thousand miles away from each other's sunburnt bodies, smoking spliffs and climbing trees, at least that's how I hope you will remember me.

Notes

This one... hurt. A lot.

Heed the warnings and don't risk your mental health for fanfiction, y'all.

- Translation into Español available: [Latas altas](#) by [ScapeSystem](#)

When Technoblade woke up, it was to the sound of the coffee pot brewing. Which was surprising, but Phil often woke up extra early after stressful events, and the day before was certainly stressful. When he left his room, Clementine was still asleep on the couch. He passed by her quietly, careful to not wake her, and entered the dining room. That was when the first actual red flag went off, because Phil was not awake. He always sat at the table to drink his coffee, and there was no sign of him.

The second red flag came by way of a post-it note with instructions on how to brew Earl Grey tea. Techno *knew* how to brew it, had been doing it for years, but it was still there, in familiar handwriting, pastel yellow against the monotone colors of the kitchen itself. Only Tommy could have written it. Again, Techno brushed this off as odd but not unheard of, Tommy had been up late, perhaps he simply wanted to sleep in but wanted to make sure Wilbur's tea was the way he liked it.

The third red flag came without any room for doubt. When Techno pushed open Tommy's door, the room was unlit. Tommy always kept a light on, a lamp or his cellphone or something to cut through the darkness. Techno flipped the light on with shaking hands and he knew.

The room was stripped bare, with no blankets or Knick-knacks or stuffed animals on the bed, no books on the shelves, no shoes or clothes in the closet that was hanging open. It was glaringly obvious he was gone. He ran to the window, begging to see the van still in the driveway, but there was nothing but the four other vehicles, Phil's, Wilbur's, Clementine's, and his own. He would deny it until the day he died, but the scream he let out, a call for his family, echoed like a mourner's grief through the home. Phil entered the room first, clearly not taking in the room itself, too focused on Techno. Wilbur entered second, and similarly was too busy comforting Techno's choked cries to realize the cause.

Clementine, though. She stood in the doorway and stared at the family in silence for thirty seconds before muttering just a single sentence.

"He didn't even say goodbye, did he?"

It was enough for the others to realize. For them to take in their surroundings, from the blank walls to the pristine condition of the sheets on the bed, spare sheets from the linen closet, not Tommy's. It was enough to make them mourn with him.

Clementine left in the morning. She promised if Tommy got in touch with her she'd let them know, promised Phil she'd keep in touch with him, and then she was gone.

Techno is fairly sure he's in shock. He'd known Tommy would leave, but he'd expected it to be different, expected to help him pack the van and wave at him as he drove away, and expected to get a phone call five hours later so Tommy could tell them about where he was. He did not expect a cold bedroom and instructions on how to make fucking *tea* to be the only things left of his baby brother when he went.

He did not expect it to hurt this bad.

—

Wilbur was not sure of the best way to be woken up, but he was positive of the worst. The sound of Techno's voice carrying through the house, panicking and calling out for them, was by far the most horrific way to be pulled from unconsciousness.

He barely registered that Techno was in Tommy's room, only knowing that his brother was in pain and it was his job to fix it.

When Clementine spoke, though, Wilbur knew there wasn't anything he could do to make it better. Everything slid into place, but there was a gaping hole where Tommy was meant to fit that was so clearly empty it was nearly palpable.

Clementine left, and when Techno made his tea he nearly choked on the flavor, not because it was bad, but because it wasn't how Techno made his tea, it was how Tommy made it. Brewed just a longer and a little sweeter than his first brother had ever done.

He wasn't going to cry. He was going to keep it together because his family needed him.

Phil sat at the head of the table, a haunted look in his eyes and a grim expression on his face. Techno wasn't sitting, pacing the room, and looking heartbroken beyond all else.

Wilbur tried to reason with himself. Tommy would call, he would text, he would *come home*. There was no way he wouldn't. Tommy left every weekend. Sure, he never cleared out his room to do so, but he would be back.

Near noon, Wilbur texted Tommy's phone.

'Rules say you're supposed to tell us before you leave the house, y'know.'

At 2 pm, Wilbur's phone buzzed.

'I'm leaving the house. Don't get stuck in a house fire about it. Lol.'

Wilbur breathed out a laugh.

"Tommy texted!"

"Really?" Phil's tone was hopeful.

"Yeah! Look," Wilbur went to show him the phone when it lit up with a call. "Tommy!"

"Heey, guys! Sorry I bailed so quickly, I was planning on leaving in the morning, I just got overwhelmed and needed a breather and now I'm... I don't know, fourteen hours away? I'm really sorry."

"We're just glad you're okay," Phil mused. "Where are you at?"

“Oh, I’m uh, outside this little diner, I need to stop and grab breakfast, I just wanted to call first. I felt really bad about this, y’know. I’m sorry I missed your calls, I was driving. Gotta call Clem back too so she doesn’t murder me.”

“The tea instructions were cute,” Techno deadpanned.

“Didn’t want Wil to have shitty tea ‘til I was back! Was being thoughtful, y’know?”

“It was a nice gesture. We thought when you left-”

“I know I said I wasn’t sure I’d stay in touch, I just didn’t want to leave you all and not say goodbye. Not that I won’t be in touch! I will, I promise, I just, it was a shitty thing to do, I’m sure it freaked you out-” Techno scoffed. “-and I’m really sorry. It was just too much, I think. Some time away to clear my head will be good for me. But I’ll be home soon, yeah? You won’t even have time to miss me.” Tommy giggled. “I’m going to go get food. We’ll talk soon, okay? I love you guys.”

“We love you too, Toms.”

“Love you, Tommy.”

“Yeah, I guess I love you.”

“Bye!” The phone went dead, and Wilbur ran a hand down his face with an airy laugh.

“What a gremlin. We really are some of the most dramatic motherfuckers, aren’t we?”

“Shut up, Wilbur.”

Texts of pictures from wherever Tommy was were frequent. They were usually daily, just pictures of tall trees and random wildlife and long stretches of roads. They were usually accompanied by a random text, something quippy and hilarious. Particularly fond ones included a fish with the caption ‘found Wil a girlfriend’ or Crows with a caption of ‘Dad, will you quit stalking me?’

They were funny. It was normal, even. Wilbur thought with Tommy gone it would leave a hole they didn’t know how to fill, but often whenever they found themselves missing him one of their phones would light up with his call, and they’d talk, and the ache would fade for a little while again.

Wilbur went back to school, threw himself into his studies with a fervor he hadn’t had in ages, with the quiet encouragement from Tommy.

Techno, too, had gotten back into school with more enthusiasm, encouraged by not only Tommy, but Dream, who had been around more and more often to keep Techno on track.

Phil had started working more, though his regular threats from Tommy kept him from slipping back into his previous habits of overworking to the point of exhaustion.

The family fell into the normalcy of life, and the wound of their youngest going off on his own was healing. They knew they wouldn’t have to miss him long.

The first fourteen hours of his trip felt like freedom. After making that phone call, it felt like running away. Tommy felt guilty beyond all else that he’d scared his family. He was sitting in a small diner, sipping watery coffee and too distracted to pay much attention to the concerned looks he was getting from the waitress.

“Need a refill, darlin’?” Tommy jumped at her closeness.

“Yes, please,” He muttered, holding out the mug to her. She smiled at him, soft and motherly.

“Where are you running to?” Tommy shrugged.

“Just away, I guess.”

“Family troubles?”

“No, not really. Me troubles, I guess.” She hummed.

“Well, if you’ve got no time crunch, we’re having the strawberry fest in a few days, It’s worth the wait.”

“Thank you, but I think I’m gonna move on. Still too close to where I’m leaving, I guess.”

“Well, if you change your mind, we have harvest fests for all the major fruits. Peaches and Cherries and Apples. We have a leek fest too, though that won’t be until next year. I’m sure the town would appreciate some new faces.” Tommy gave her a smile, paid his bill, and moved on. He slept in the van on the side of the freeway and showered in truck stops and plastered a smile on his face when he called home. He let the familiar voices calm him down as he joked about how good it was to have some fresh air. When they hung up, Tommy sat and contemplated whether or not the freedom was worth the ache.

He went west. He found a small town far enough away that he felt like his past couldn’t chase him down, and he settled in for a few weeks. He met a few people, people not unlike Schlatt in their bad habits with good morals, but Tommy wasn’t a kid to them, Tommy was an adult and so they didn’t hesitate when they offered him something to take the edge off.

Tommy declined and moved on after that. He texted home, sent them a picture of the road stretched out in front of him, and smiled when they sent back their reactions.

He went west.

He stopped in a little town to change his oil and tires and pretended to laugh alone when the mechanic told him jokes about the van. He was again offered a place to stay, was told that if he wanted to hang around they'd show him how to keep the van running smoothly on his own, but Tommy shrugged him off and told them he'd be alright, and they let him go with a phone number for if he ever was in the area and wanted to stop by. Tommy tossed it in the glove box and forgot it existed. He called home and sent them a picture of a musician with a guitar covered in stickers and messy hair and told Wilbur he'd found his better twin. The teasing felt familiar, but in the same way the aching in his back felt familiar, a dull throb and proof that things were still the same. Summer gave way to fall. Tommy found a town full of dilapidated homes and vehicles that were more rust than metal and he picked up smoking from the people there who seemed to pick it up young and stick with it til it killed them. The smell of smoke made his stomach turn, but the nicotine calmed his nerves and settled some of his anxieties.

He sent Techno a picture of the saddest library he'd ever seen, a room barely bigger than a standard classroom still somehow full of half-bare shelves. Techno took almost two days to reply, and all he replied with was 'ew'. Tommy tried not to let it get to him.

He had gotten used to longer and longer gaps between replies from all of his family, really. Phil often didn't reply at all, just sending an emoji or a single word to indicate he'd seen the message. Tommy stopped sending pictures.

He always called on Saturday mornings. It was the few guaranteed times everyone would be home, so he'd call and lie and say things were going great, would tease them about whatever they'd been up to, and hide the way he coughed into his shirt from the cigarettes that burned his throat and caked his lungs. He always told them he loved them, and that he'd talk to them soon.

Come Winter, he settled down in a University town on the coast. He made friends with the students there, regularly attended parties where he let himself slip into old habits with the

burn of liquor and the laughing of near-perfect strangers when he told a joke that was more like a confession. When winter passed, he left, with a newly stocked liquor cabinet that he broke into most nights after he'd finished driving.

The first Saturday his call went to voicemail, he drank the whole day. He parked on the shoreline and drank for hours, ignored the calls back he received only a few hours later, ignored the texts apologizing. Sunday, he called them again, and pretended his head wasn't pounding when he listened to them talk over themselves in apologies he didn't think he really cared about.

"It's not a big deal, guys. It's just a phone call. It's not like we don't talk every week."

"Still, I feel terrible. I totally slept in and I didn't even think about it-"

"Wil. I said it's fine, man. What have you three been up to?"

They talked about school and work and how good things had been recently, and Tommy pretended like it didn't sting, knowing that his family had moved on so gracefully without him. He told them he was on the coast, that the ocean was so blue, even in winter, told them he'd made friends and was doing well. They took it as the truth, and Tommy wondered when they'd stopped being able to see through his lies. He wondered when he became a liar.

The best way to describe it was like drowning. Tommy felt like he was drowning. When he pulled himself out of bed to drive, it felt like he was floating, the drives were lost to highway hypnosis. He'd stopped taking in the new sights, just the vision of grey asphalt and yellow lines to keep him from crashing. He'd stopped visiting towns. He'd pass by out-of-place diners and fast food places instead of finding something cozy and surrounded by the warmth of a community. He'd run out of meds weeks ago, hadn't cared enough to refill them. He didn't call home on Saturday.

He got coffee from a shop in a city he didn't know the name of. He stood out against the imposing figures of suits and polished shoes. He wondered if they thought he looked as strange as he felt.

He cropped his hair short with dollar store scissors when it started brushing his shoulders. It was uneven and sloppy but Tommy didn't have it in him to care. He smoked and listened to the sounds of the woods and the ocean and he let his music play too loud when he should have been sleeping but was too busy driving to care.

He started East again, enough time on the coast to be sick of it. He didn't know where he was going, but he knew he'd turn around before he made it home. It wasn't like they missed him anyway.

"What's today?" Wilbur asked.

"Uh, Sunday? Why?" Techno replied from where he was working on his homework.

"Did Tommy call yesterday?" Techno shrugged.

"I dunno. Maybe? If not I'm sure he was just busy. He's out on the coast right now, right? They just got a heatwave. He's probably enjoying the heat."

"It's kind of weird, though, right? I feel like he never texts us anymore."

"Maybe the kid's just busy. I mean, He is basically living alone. Must have a lot of things to do."

"Yeah, I guess so. Maybe I'll text him and see if he wants to call later on today."

Wil didn't get a reply to the text. He shrugged it off and went out to dinner with Nikki.

He spent a week at school working on his new music, and the thought of his younger brother was basically pushed aside. He didn't really think of it until Schlatt, of all people, brought it up.

"So, how's the kid? He hasn't replied to me in like a week."

"Oh, me either. We think he's just enjoying the warm weather on the coast, honestly. Apparently, they got a heatwave." Schlatt frowned.

"You aren't concerned about the fact that he's gone off the grid for a week?"

"Not really, no. He's been having a good time, I don't think it's anything to be too concerned about. He says he's been doing really well." Wilbur laughed. "Hold on, he sent me a picture of him with those massive trees, let me see if I can find it." Wil pulled up Tommy's contact and when he scrolled up, expecting it to take a while, he was a little shocked to see it was only about fifteen messages up. He'd sent that photo weeks ago, hadn't he? Had they really not talked in that long? "Uh, here it is." Wilbur showed Schlatt the picture, who grinned for a second before his eyes narrowed.

"Has he lost weight? The kid didn't have any left to lose."

"No, I think he's gotten taller, actually. He said something about a growth spurt a few months back." Schlatt hummed.

"I think I'm gonna give him a call." Wilbur shrugged. The phone rang for a second before Tommy answered.

"What's up?"

"Kid! I saw the pictures of you with the trees! You get any taller you're gonna look like them soon." Tommy's laugh was tinny and *fake*.

“Ugh, I know. All of my pants are too short. How’s home?”

“Eh, it’s home. You know how it is. How are you though? Haven’t heard from ya in a bit.”

“Yes, that’s because you’re a bitch.”

“Have you been keeping in touch with the others?” Schlatt held up a hand to Wilbur when he went to protest.

“Oh, yeah. Talk to Wil and Tech all the time, helped Tubs with homework like just a few hours ago.” Schlatt frowned.

“Oh, how’s he? Haven’t talked to him in a bit.”

“Yeah, he seems good. Listen, I gotta go, yeah? Talk soon.” The call cut off.

“Isn’t Tubbo on break?”

“Yeah, He is. Why’s your kid brother lying about it?”

“Huh. I don’t know. That’s kind of weird, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s super weird. Let me know next time you talk to him, okay? Something seems up.”

“Sure.”

Tommy didn't call Saturday. He did text, saying he had a bit of a cold and his voice was shot. Wilbur frowned at the message before relaying it to his family members, who shrugged it off. Wil couldn't help but have a bad feeling about it, but he was busy, and it sort of slipped his mind again. Tommy was doing well, even if he was being distant, it wasn't anything to be concerned about.

Techno didn't really notice Tommy's strange behavior either. He was sitting with Dream in the gym, waiting for his friend to finish his workout, when he got a text from Tommy, just a reply to Techno's own "good morning" from nearly three days ago.

"It's afternoon now but yes gm" Techno snorted.

"What're we laughing at?" Dream asked, sitting down next to him.

"Oh, Tommy. Texted him a few days ago and he just now got back to me."

"It took him days to get back to you?"

"Oh, yeah. He takes ages to text back honestly, he's horrible about it."

"I mean I know he sucks at texting me back, I haven't heard from him in like a month, but I figured he was still keeping in touch with you guys."

"Oh, he used to call once a week, he's missed the last couple though..." Techno frowned.

"Huh. That is kind of weird, isn't it?"

“He’s been distant for weeks and you’re just now thinking it’s weird?” Techno frowned more, scrolling through his texts.

“He’s been distant for a while, honestly. I’ve only gotten like 20 messages from him in the last two months.”

“You didn’t think that was *concerning*?”

“Not... really? I mean he wanted space, it makes sense he’s not attached to his phone all the time.”

“I think it’s a little strange. How’s he been acting?”

“Fine, normal. He seems happy. We don’t really talk a whole lot about what he’s been up to, usually he wants to talk about us, but from what he’s told us he’s having a good time.” Dream scrunched up his nose a bit.

“Something seems weird about it, doesn’t it? He’s out exploring and he doesn’t want to talk about it at all? Does that sound like him to you?”

“Maybe he’s changed. That was kind of the point of him leaving, wasn’t it?”

“I mean, I guess.”

“Has Tommy seemed weird to you guys lately?” Wilbur asked one Saturday afternoon after no call had come, again.

“Weird how?”

“I don’t know, just weird. I barely ever hear from him, he never calls anymore, he’s stopped talking about when he’s coming home. Schlatt asked him a few weeks ago about him staying in contact with us and he straight up lied and said he’d been talking to us all the time and helping Tubbo with homework, but Tubbo said he’s only talked to him once in like four months other than a few texts.”

“Dream said the same thing, talked about how it was weird for him to be so distant and how strange it was that he didn’t want to talk about his trip at all.” Techno shrugged.

“Well, the trip’s whole purpose was for him to find some room to breathe, I’m sure it’s nothing to be worried about. He always sounds happy when he calls.”

“Well yeah, but when was the last time he called?” Phil frowned at that, setting down his book.

“Huh. I’m not sure, actually. Let’s give him a ring.” Phil dialed the number and it rang a few times before Tommy answered.

“Ayup.”

“Hey Tommy, it’s Dad.”

“O-oh. Heyy, Dad. How’re you, big man? The boys with ya?” Phil raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, Wil and Techno are here.” They both greeted him.

“Hey, guys! How’s school and work been? Wil, any new songs? Spotify’s getting a little bland.” There was something... *off* about the way Tommy was speaking.

“Are you... Drunk?” Wilbur asked incredulously.

“Course not. You know me, just drugs and women, no booze to be found.” It sounded like a joke, but it kind of fell flat.

“Are you high, then?” Tommy scoffed from the other side.

“Oh yes, super high. You know me, love doing the drugs. Don’t ask stupid questions, Wil. Of course, I’m not.” He sounded angry, almost.

“Sorry, you just sound a little weird.”

“I’m super tired, man. Went hiking for a few hours today. Back’s killing me.”

“Oh. Uh, okay.”

“So, new songs? How’s school? Work? Nobody’s answering my questions over here.”

“Oh, uh, yeah, I’ll send you some recordings of stuff I wrote and some stuff I found later. School’s good.”

“Same here, it’s fine.”

“Work sucks, but it always does. You know how it is.” Tommy laughed at that, but now that they were looking for it, it sounded a little forced.

“Hope you aren’t working too hard, Old man. What are you guys doing for Christmas?”

“What... do you mean?” Phil asked carefully.

“It wasn’t a trick question. What are you doing for Christmas?”

“Tommy, it’s January. Christmas was weeks ago.”

“Oh, holy shit! You’re totally right! Time goes weird out here man, It’s not cold enough to tell that it’s actually winter half the time. How was it?”

‘Quiet, without you.’ Is what Wilbur wanted to say. But... honestly, he hadn’t actually *thought* much about Tommy during Christmas. The realization made him a little nauseous.

“It was nice. We had some people over and watched movies, mostly. Nothing big.”

“Cool, cool. Listen, I gotta get going, yeah? Gonna grab some food and shower maybe. We’ll talk soon.” Phil frowned.

“Okay. Have a good night, Toms. I love-” The phone went dead. “-you. That... was odd.”

“I mean, he seemed okay, though? A little spacey, but Tommy’s always like that,” Techno shrugged. “Maybe he really was just tired.”

“Tired enough to not remember Christmas? We *talked* to him on Christmas, Tech, didn’t we?”

“Did we? I don’t remember that.” Phil was frowning still.

“I don’t think we did, actually. I don’t even think I texted him.” Wilbur shifted uncomfortably.

“I mean, he left to get some space, it’s not a *bad* thing that we’re giving it to him, right?”

“I don’t know,” Phil mumbled. “I’m sure we’re just overreacting.”

“Exactly. It’s *Tommy* . He always tells us how he’s feeling. If something was wrong, we’d know.”

“But... he *didn’t* always tell us how he was feeling. He got better at it, but in the beginning, he never told us shit. Or he would but only if he was freaking out.”

“Yeah, but he got better, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Wilbur wasn’t so sure.

Tommy hated the burn of gin. It wasn’t pleasant warmth, it just stung and made his mouth feel dry. But that was his poison of choice, sitting on the cliffside like it was the edge of the world. It wasn’t even a good cliff, no water below, just the side of a mountain, really, but the open-air felt nice, the harsh cold bit at his skin and reminded him that he existed.

He’d missed Christmas. That was what was bothering him the most. Well, no, what was bothering him was that nobody else seemed to miss him at Christmas, but that wasn’t too much of a shock. Out of sight, out of mind, right? His family was healing. They were doing fine without him. It wasn’t a surprise they hadn’t asked him to come home for the holidays.

He wasn’t sure if he would have, anyway.

There were campers somewhere below him. He could hear them laughing. The sunset was pretty, oranges and reds bouncing off the evergreens in a way that made everything look gold. He took another drink. He'd be miserable in the morning, but at least he could quiet his head for a bit. When the gold faded and the stars came out in full, he laid in the dirt and watched the way the milky way seemed to swirl above him. Less light pollution here, you could see millions of stars. He thought about how much Tubbo would like it.

Tubbo, who he *still* hadn't texted back. The idea of replying felt like an impossible feat. More energy than he could muster. When the cold made his hands start feeling like they were hot instead of numbingly cold, he went back to the van. He curled under his blankets and didn't bother charging the phone that disappointed him.

Nobody would notice anyway.

Wilbur wished he could say the worry over Tommy stuck. But he was busy, he was cruising through his courses and his music was really taking off, and really, it sort of became a backburner thought.

And when a month of no contact at all passed, he just blew it off. Tommy was a busy kid, out seeing the world. Sure, it was strange, but *Tommy* was strange.

And when he finished his semester with the best grades he'd ever had, he celebrated with his friends and didn't consider that the spring semester ending had meant that spring had ended, and he'd missed Tommy's birthday.

And apparently, neither did his father or brother. His brother, who at Tommy's encouragement during last summer, had sent in the first draft of his novel early to a publisher, and was now working through the revisions from his new editor, because they were enthralled with his writing and were very excited to work with him. His father, who had started working less but became more productive somehow now that he was sleeping regularly and had gotten some sort of promotion that left them far better off than they'd been before.

His family, who had heeded at their youngest's demands and didn't realize they were leaving said youngest behind in their wakes.

Techno was buried in revision work for his novel when his phone rang. He barely glanced at it, it was Tommy, who he hadn't spoken to in ages, but he was *busy*, he had to have these revisions done in three weeks, by the end of summer, and he still had nearly a hundred pages to go. He could call back later.

When he finished working for the night, he tried to call back and got Tommy's obnoxious voice mail.

"Just returning your call, kid. Shoot me a text when you're able."

He brushed it off. No big deal. Tommy would call back in the morning.

The call never came through. He did get a text, just a simple 'No worries, pocket dial.' From Tommy. He snorted and didn't bother listening to the voicemail that he had left. He'd been ignoring it for hours at this point anyway, it's not like it'd make much of a difference if it was just the sounds of the kid's pocket.

Wilbur was on stage when he felt his phone buzz in his shirt pocket. It was early fall, he'd gotten a gig at a local indie fest and he'd drawn a pretty decent crowd. He rolled his eyes and ignored it while it rang out, focusing instead on the people who had actually come to see *him* play.

He saw a voicemail from Tommy the next evening, but he didn't listen, opting to just call him back. The voice that answered the phone wasn't Tommy.

"Uhhh, 'ello?"

"You're not Tommy."

"Oh, Nah, Tommy's in the water right now man, He'll have to call you back."

"Oh. Uh, just tell him Wil called, yeah?"

"Ooooh, I knew I recognized your voice, man! You're the musician, right? Tom showed us your shit, it's really somethin' else."

"Yeah, that's me. Thanks, I guess."

"Yeah no for sure dude. Night!" The conversation ended. Wil laughed it off.

Phil had gone to bed early. Earlier than usual, even, asleep just after the sun had fully set at 5 pm, exhausted from a long day at work and an afternoon at the beach with the boys, so his phone was on silent when Tommy called. He didn't even see the missed call notification until two days later, so he almost felt bad calling back, but it *had* been a while since he'd spoken to his youngest, so he rang him anyway.

"Hey, Phil." Tommy's voice sounded tired.

"Hey, Kiddo! Did I wake you? You sound dead on your feet, mate."

“Oh, yeah, I took a mid-afternoon nap. What’s up?”

“I was just returning your call! I missed it the other day.”

“Ah. Yeah, it wasn’t anything important, just wanted to see how you guys were doing.”

“We’re doing great! The new promotion means way more time off, Tech’s book is about to go to print, and Wil has been talking to a label about his album! It’s all good here! What about you, Toms? What have you been up to?” The line was silent for just a beat too long. “You there?”

“Yeah, yeah I’m here. Sorry, brain fog, just woke up. Uh, no, not much. Just traveling I guess. Er, god how long has it been since we talked? I uh, went to an apple orchard a few weeks ago with a friend, I went cliff diving a little while ago, that was cool. I went to the country’s largest theme park for my birthday, that was alright... Uh, I was actually pretty close to home a few weeks ago, didn’t even realize until after we were like two days away and I checked the map and realized the town I was in was only a few hours drive out. That was crazy. Blew a tire last week, took me ages to get it changed, some trucker ended up helping me because it was such a pain. But yeah, just a lot of exploring I guess. Bein’ one with nature and all that shit.”

Phil had stopped listening after Tommy mentioned his birthday. His *birthday, which was seven months ago*. Another event had passed and they never even spoke about it. And Tommy didn’t even sound upset, he mentioned it like it was no big deal at all. Hell, they were coming back up on winter again, who was to say that Tommy wouldn’t be gone for another Christmas? Was it selfish to ask him to come home? Was it selfish to *not*? He wondered if giving him space was the wrong move.

“Sounds... sounds like fun, kiddo. Have you been keeping in touch with your brothers? They’ve been so busy lately,”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve... called a few times. Usually ended up like my call the other day. Voicemail, y’know. Time zones and all make it hard to find a good time to talk.”

“What about your friends? How have they been?”

“Eh, You’d know better than me. Too busy with school, I reckon. Haven’t talked to Ranboo in probably a year, and it’s definitely been at least 8 months since I’ve spoken to Tubbo. I actually talked to Schlatt a few weeks ago, though. He called me so early that I think it almost counted as late, so drunk off his ass I could barely understand what he was saying. That was weird. Guess him and Wil aren’t talking a whole lot anymore.” It was said so casually that it made Phil wince, but he kept his tone light.

“No, they got into some sort of fight. They’ll get over it, Wilbur just likes his dramatics.”

“For sure, for sure,” Tommy agreed absently.

“So, I was wondering, Tommy, since the holi-” Phil was cut off by Tommy’s voice echoing from the phone as if he was holding it away from him but yelling.

“Stop being a bitch, I’ll be there in a second!” The voice was closer again. *“Hey, sorry, I gotta go, talk soon, yeah?”*

“Oh, but-” Tommy hung up. Phil sighed. He’d bring up the holidays on their next call, surely.

Tommy spent his 19th birthday with near-perfect strangers at an amusement park he didn’t want to go to. He spent most of the day checking his phone for a message, a call, *any* sort of indication that his family remembered he existed. It never came through. His... new acquaintances spent several hours giving him sympathetic looks before eventually taking his phone from him and stuffing it in their bag so he would stop checking.

They were wanderers, like him, and he'd run into them just a few days ago, and when they'd found out his birthday was approaching they'd made it their weird mission to celebrate with him, because apparently, birthdays are important.

He did actually have a lot of fun, once the phone had been taken, and he found himself enjoying it far more than he expected to. He was grateful, and when they went their separate ways that evening he had a stack of photos and a smile on his face for the first time in a while.

He started meeting a lot of wanderers, actually. He'd started venturing to the kind of places that attracted them.

In Summer, He called Techno for the first time in months. He was low, miserable despite the friends he had half made in his time away.

It didn't go through, and Tommy left a voicemail.

"Hey, Tech. Sorry, I called at a bad time, I just... I'm really tired today. I miss you, I miss home, and it feels like maybe I'm not welcome there anymore. I know you're all doing well, and I'm happy for you, really, I just wish I could be there to celebrate with you. I know I could just drive home, but I'm afraid if I show up I'll just kill the mood, I guess.

I'm not calling to get your reassurance or anything, I just... I just wanted to hear your voice, I guess. It's not a big deal, I'm sure I'll feel better in the morning. I... I love you."

Tommy hung up crying, and he was half sure he'd never felt so small. When Techno called back, Tommy pretended like it was just a pocket dial. He was pretty sure Techno didn't listen to his message. That was fine. Wouldn't want to waste the time on him, anyway.

The low didn't fade, it built and built for weeks, and Tommy tried reaching out again, this time to Wilbur, with some sort of desperation. He just needed someone to tell him he'd be okay, needed some sign they still cared.

It went to voicemail. Tommy left a message.

“Hi. I-uh. Sorry, I didn’t mean to take up your time, I hope I didn’t bug you, or anything. I’m not doing super well, right now, I guess I just wanted to talk about it. It gets lonely out here alone. Trees don’t make great conversationalists. I miss home. I miss home so much it burns, I miss being able to sleep without a drink, I miss listening to you play. I miss the good days. I don’t think I’ve had one in a while.

I keep thinking about the cliffs. I shouldn’t. I spent so long getting better, but they’re screaming for me again. I met some friends a few weeks ago that said there was a spot where you could jump from the cliffs and hit water so clear you could go thirty feet down and still see the surface. I think we’re gonna go try that tomorrow. Maybe it’ll settle whatever’s been bugging me lately.

Call me back if you want, yeah? I love you.”

Tommy was halfway down the cliff when Wilbur called back. When he’d gotten out of the water, one of his new friends had said he called.

“Did... was he upset?” Tommy asked carefully.

“Nah, dude. Sounded kinda tired and annoyed though, might have been because I answered.” Tommy doubted that was why. He didn’t return his call.

He drove East. He didn’t realize where he was headed until he started recognizing the buildings of his childhood. He didn’t stop until he was parked just outside the corporation limits of home. He parked and stared at the sign for what felt like hours, trying to steel his nerves and make the final ten-minute drive, but he couldn’t. He cried right on the outskirts of home for hours then turned around, and headed back West.

He’d only made it a few hours when his phone rang. He pulled over and answered it.

“He..llo? What’s up, Schlatt?” His voice was still croaky.

“Tommy, man, I missed you! Are you home?”

“I, no, I’m not. Are you drunk?”

“Yeah, but I thought I saw your van coming into town earlier!” Tommy swallowed.

“Oh, no, wasn’t me. I’m like 30 hours West of home, man.”

“That’s a shame, I miss you. Wil’s too good to talk to me anymore. He’s mad because I called him a selfish prick.”

“Why’d you call him that?”

“Well, he was being one! Did ya know he missed your birthday?” Tommy laughed.

“Yeah, I noticed. You guys got into a fight because he missed my birthday?”

“Wasn’t the only reason, but that started it, yeah. He said it wasn’t that big of a deal, I said it totally was, he told me you were happy adventuring and it wasn’t his place to bother you, I told ‘im he was stupid as shit, it devolved from there. Happy late birthday, man. When you come home we’ll have to celebrate. I bet Nikki will make you cake.”

“I don’t really think I’m coming home, big man. But if I ever do, I’ll let you know.”

“Don’t blame ya. This place sucks.” Tommy snorted.

“Yeah, it does. We’ll talk soon, man. I gotta go.”

“Tommy?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“They’ve got their blinders on, man, but they really do care about you, y’know.”

“I’ll talk to you later, Schlatt.” Tommy hung up the phone and rested his forehead against the steering wheel.

He drove west.

As fall came in full force and winter started to kill off the last living plants, Tommy landed back on the coast, yearning to be anywhere else. He wanted to be home, but he was fairly sure at this point that he wasn’t welcome. Why else would they ignore him, right?

He tried again to settle the shattered glass that shifted around inside his chest. He called his dad. And it rang out.

“Hey, Da- uh, Phil. I guess I don’t really get to call you that anymore, huh? Been gone longer than I was ever there. I just... I miss you. I’m not doing well, It’s gotten to the point that I’m not sure there’s a way back up, honestly. I just thought... Well, I guess it doesn’t matter what I thought. I love you. I’m glad you guys are doing so well without me.”

Tommy drove east.

He talked to Phil a few days later, when he called while Tommy was puking from the alcohol binge he'd been on for the last week or so. The people he was hanging out with hadn't given him their names, just handed him a bottle and offered him a seat around the fire.

Phil said they were doing great, and that felt like the last straw. Tommy felt like an asshole for being bitter at their success, but something about the idea of them doing so *well* without him made his decision to not come home that much easier. They were better off without him.

He barely listened to the rest of the conversation, rattling off his own adventures and lack of contact flatly before pretending he had to go.

He drove east.

He spent Christmas drunk. He spent the New Year painfully sober.

He spent the rest of Winter sober, actually. When winter gave way to spring, He made it two hours from what used to be home, and he made one last-ditch attempt to be okay.

He called home. He was only a little surprised he got the answering machine.

"Hey, guys. I'm... well, I turned twenty today. Happy birthday to me, I guess. I- I'm going to miss you all. You're doing so well, though, and I'm really happy for you. That's not sarcasm, either, I am genuinely really proud of you for doing well.

I tried to reach out before it came to this, I swear. I left voicemails, I tried to call, but... I guess you didn't hear me. That's okay. It's not your fault, I wouldn't want to listen to me either.

Do... I don't know if you remember the conversation after the fire. When I told you... when I told you all I was for was to keep you safe, so you'd have the chance to change the world? I guess I did that. Wil, with your music, and Tech with your stories, and Phil with your coding and everything you've done in your life. You guys are going to do great things, I'm really

proud of you. I'm really glad I got the chance to meet you all. I'm really sorry." Tommy hung up the phone, he looked out over the rocks, to the waters hundreds of feet below. He felt free.

When Phil woke up that morning, he saw there was a message on the landline. He scarcely remembered they *had* a landline. He clicked play, and when his youngest son's voice echoed through, all tinny and so, so tired, he paused it. It was April Tenth.

The family listened to the message in mournful silence.

"I- I called him back, I never listened to his voicemail. He said it was a pocket dial," Techno muttered. He pulled out his cell phone and listened to his brother's cry for help for the first time.

"Hey, Tech. Sorry, I called at a bad time, I just... I'm really tired today. I miss you, I miss home, and it feels like maybe I'm not welcome there anymore. I know you're all doing well, and I'm happy for you, really, I just wish I could be there to celebrate with you. I know I could just drive home, but I'm afraid if I show up I'll just kill the mood, I guess.

I'm not calling to get your reassurance or anything, I just... I just wanted to hear your voice, I guess. It's not a big deal, I'm sure I'll feel better in the morning. I... I love you." They all winced.

Wilbur stared at his own phone in dawning horror. "I did the same. I- I just called him back. Someone else answered, and I kind of forgot about it. He played his own message.

"Hi. I-uh. Sorry, I didn't mean to take up your time, I hope I didn't bug you, or anything. I'm not doing super well, right now, I guess I just wanted to talk about it. It gets lonely out here alone. Trees don't make great conversationalists. I miss home. I miss home so much it burns, I miss being able to sleep without a drink, I miss listening to you play. I miss the good days. I don't think I've had one in a while.

I keep thinking about the cliffs. I shouldn't. I spent so long getting better, but they're screaming for me again. I met some friends a few weeks ago that said there was a spot where you could jump from the cliffs and hit water so clear you could go thirty feet down and still see the surface. I think we're gonna go try that tomorrow. Maybe it'll settle whatever's been bugging me lately.

Call me back if you want, yeah? I love you." Wilbur was crying.

Phil pulled his own phone out with shaking hands. "I... I talked to him. We spoke after I missed his call, and I didn't realize.." He clicked play.

"Hey, Da- uh, Phil. I guess I don't really get to call you that anymore, huh? Been gone longer than I was ever there. I just... I miss you. I'm not doing well, It's gotten to the point that I'm not sure there's a way back up, honestly. I just thought... Well, I guess it doesn't matter what I thought. I love you. I'm glad you guys are doing so well without me."

Phil dialed Tommy's number with shaking hands. It went to voicemail. He called again.

And again.

And again.

The same message, the same happy voicemail message, *"Doin' big man shit, tell me who ya are and I'll call ya back."* Phil wasn't sure the last time Tommy had sounded like that.

Two days later, they got a call from Tommy's phone, but it wasn't him.

Just a police officer letting them know the van was discovered abandoned two hours from home.

They recovered the body a few weeks later.

The funeral was quiet. Friends and Family mourned. Guilt festered. Schlatt glared daggers at Wil. Dream did not wear his mask. Tubbo held a small bee plush that was well-loved with age. Ranboo had never looked so small. Margaret looked at the coffin as if she stared long enough it would disappear. Eret wore a purple sundress.

Clementine did not show up.

Spring gave way to summer, and Techno dedicated his book ‘To Theseus, who deserved more than the fall.’

Wilbur dedicated his album to ‘The brother I didn’t get to know’

Phil left flowers on a grave, with dates much too close together.

And when his oldest sons left home, he made sure to call every day.

He never let them reach his voicemail. He figured, at the very least, he owed that much to them.

“Are you ready to rest, Little bird?”

‘Yeah, I think it’s time.’

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